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ABSTRACT

The psychological report is a particular genre of writing, incorporating elements of content and style shared by other literary genres, and appearing in many different forms. These forms range from terse, profile driven description of strengths and weaknesses, characteristic of computer generated psychological reports, to more descriptive, integrative accounts which more closely approach the narrative structure of literary works. This paper describes: (1) the development of subject in psychological evaluation of children from dual perspectives of literary narrative and psychological assessment; (2) the development and portrayal of the story of the child's life, including events of developmental growth, family, and schooling, from both narrative structure and framework of psychological testing and report writing; (3) the contribution of the psychologist to the construction of the narrative of a child's life as told within the body of the psychological report; and (4) the relationship of the reader to text from both a literary perspective and from perspectives of psychological evaluation and report writing. This shift from psychologist as unmasker of objective truth to participant in construction of narrative may be viewed within the context of epistemological shifts from scientific positivism socially constructed viewpoint. (Author/JBJ)

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Co-Construction of Narrative in the Psychological Assessment of Children

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RUNNING HEAD: CO-CONSTRUCTION OF NARRATIVE

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Abstract:

The psychological report is a particular genre of writing, incorporating elements of content and style shared by other literary genres, and appearing in many different forms. These forms range from terse, profile driven description of strengths and weaknesses, characteristic of computer generated psychological reports, to more descriptive, integrative accounts which more closely approach the narrative structure of literary works.

This paper will describe the development of subject in the psychological evaluation of children from the dual perspectives of literary narrative and psychological assessment. The development and portrayal of the story of the child's life, including the events of developmental growth, family, and schooling will be explored from both the literary perspective of narrative structure and from within the framework of psychological testing and report writing.

The contribution of the psychologist to the construction of the narrative of a child's life as told within the body of the psychological report will be examined. This shift from psychologist as unmasker of objective truth to participant in construction of narrative may be viewed within the context of the epistemological shift from scientific positivism to a socially constructed viewpoint (Howard, 1991, Spence, 1982, Kuhn, 1977). The impossibility of the objective stance of the psychologist will be raised, as well. The relationship of the reader to text will be examined from both a literary perspective as well as from the perspectives of psychological evaluation and report writing.

Psychological assessment: Points of view

"Assessment," as used in common, i.e. non-psychological, parlance refers to "an official valuation of property for the purpose of taxation," while "psychological" refers to "that which is directed towards the will or the mind" (Webster, 1990). The pairing of these two terms, assessment and psychological are, from the outside in, an unusual, even startling event. Taken literally, assessment and psychological, suggest that the sum total of a person's unique and idiosyncratic features may be framed within a procedure for determining their value.

The implications of placing value on a person's cognition and behavior are unsettling, at the very least, and suggest that at its core psychological evaluation serves to sort and categorize children. Beyond considerations of the desirability of psychological evaluation playing a role in sorting people, the feasibility of assigning a value to a person's "actions, traits, attitudes, thoughts, etc." can be called into question. Assignation of value suggests that a standard set of criteria may be identified and applied universally as a measure of the personal and idiosyncratic. Moreover, it implies that qualities may be organized hierarchically from the least to the most valuable.

The psychological literature on testing and report writing offers us an evolving definition of psychological evaluation, one which moves between a yearning for a quantifiable, objective method of gathering and understanding data about a person's mental processes, and a growing cognizance of the limitations of this quest. An early definition, from the heyday of psychological testing in the immediate post-World War II era, claimed that: "Psychological testing is an effort to obtain whole and systematic samples of certain types of

verbal, perceptual, and motor behavior, in the frame of a standardized situation (Rapaport, 1945). Echoes of positivism are heard; psychological evaluation, it was confidently hoped, could capture, as through the lens of a camera, the totality of a person's cognitive and affective processes.

In the forward to a later, revised edition of that volume, Holt, in his editorial comments reconsiders Rapaport, Gill and Schafer's classic work on psychological testing, and suggests that it in fact falls outside of the tradition of diagnostic classification, and within a tradition of "construction of a verbal model of a personality... " (Holt, 1979, p. 18). Shades of social constructivist theory are heard here, although Holt stops short of implying a more active role on the part of the psychological examiner in constructing this model of personality. This verbal model, as described by Holt, is constructed through the psychological examiner's skillful use of a battery of tests and examination of the subject's pattern of test responses.

Currently, the term "assessment" is often preferred over the term "testing," because of its implications of a more comprehensive and integrated appraisal which does not rely solely on the administration of tests, but rather encourages the examiner to think more broadly and conceptually about problems (Weaver, 1984). Unlike the 'tester' whose report focuses on test scores alone, the assessor explores the uses of his/her subjective understanding (Matarazzo, 1990).

Tallent (1993) notes that psychological assessment and report writing are in a state of flux. Although many of the instruments used in testing are physically similar to those used in the present time, they differ in both in terms of conceptualization and use. Tallent describes the psychological report as the "caboose" which drives the assessment; the goal is increasingly to solve a

problem, while the report delivers the information and provides the framework for reconsideration of the referral questions. Lovitt (1988) describes the shift from a case based approach to a more focused evaluation which directly responds to the questions posed. Report writing has, consequently, increasingly taken on the form of a consultation based inquiry while moving away from the case study format. A risk, here, though, is a turn towards a narrowly focussed, score centered genre of report writing, best illustrated by data driven computer generated psychological reports.

Drawing upon constructivist thought (Polkinghorne, 1988, Bruner, 1986, Gardner, 1985) a narrative approach to psychological assessment creates another venue for understanding a life, providing a lens through which to view development. The constructed reality of the child's life acquires coherence through the interactive work of the psychological evaluator, and finds expression in the psychological report.

Constructing a narrative of character : The literary case

The psychological report may be viewed as a construction of the story of a child's growth and development over time, and within a context of place. The story that the psychological report tells, therefore, goes beyond a summation of test results, integrating not only test items, but also the particularities of a specific child, growing within a specific family, and within a specific social and cultural context. The narrative of the psychological report, replete with detail and example, seeks to describe the whole child, how his/her responses to both test material and to life experiences are descriptive of a unique child with a particular history.

The character in a literary work is similarly described through the

narrator's attempts to provide both objective and subjective information. The external or objective vision is likened to behaviorist discourse: narration as recording, devoid of internal consciousness. The more we as readers know subjectively about a character, though, how that character thinks and reasons, how he/she feels, the greater our access to and our affinity for that character. A key part to the attraction of reading novels is the sense, however illusory, that the reader can have closer understanding of another person than is possible in real life. In this way, we feel we may come to know fictional characters perhaps even better than we know friends or family (Miller, 1992). Lanser (1981) observes that the narrator permits us to gain access to a character's "I" through a variety of means: from the narrator's own point of view, the character's self presentation, the viewpoint of another character, or from a completely external mode, with a notable absence of any reflection. The "I" of the first person narrative offers us the possibility of most closely experiencing what the character sees and experiences.

Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain's classic "case study" of resilience in a boy, for example, is narrated from the very start by Huck, with the author's voice shadowing that of his character. " You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth " (p.3). Through Huck's voice, we learn about Colonel Grangerford, for example, both in terms of outward appearance and his development as a character. We hear, thus, not only about the Colonel, but also about how Huck perceived him, and what the relationship between the two was like.

"Colonel Grangerford was very tall and very slim, and had a darkish-paly

complexion, not a sign of red in it anywheres; he was clean shaved every morning all over his thin face, and he had the thinnest kind of lips, and the thinnest kind of nostrils, and high nose, and heavy eyebrows, and the blackest kind of eyes, sunk so deep back that they seemed like they was looking out of caverns at you, as you may say. ... He was as kind as he could be - you could feel that, you know, and so you had confidence" (p. 102).

The narrator's view of the character introduces some distance as we view the character through the filter of the narrator's experience. The perspective becomes somewhat more detached, more intellectualized than in the first person narrative. Twain's voice is clearly heard in his third person narration of Tom Sawyer; the image of Tom confronted with the loathsome task of painting a fence has become an icon of youth, at once recalcitrant and enterprising.

"Tom appeared on the side-walk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush. He surveyed the fence, and the gladness went out of nature, and a deep melancholy settled down upon his spirit. Thirty yards of broad fence nine feet high! It seemed to him that life was hollow, and existence but a burden. Sighing he dipped his brush and passed it along the topmost plank; repeated the operation; did it again; compared the insignificant whitewashed streak with the far-reaching continent of unwhitewashed fence, and sat down on a tree-box discouraged. ...Tom gave up his brush with reluctance in his face, but alacrity in his heart" (p. 15).

At times, a character is described in a seemingly objective light, permitting little access to the subjective world of the character, yet evoking a visual image in the reader's mind emblematic of the character. What appears on the surface to be objective, upon closer inspection reveals the viewpoint of

the narrator. In this light Twain describes the Sunday-school superintendent to whom Tom Sawyer is most reluctantly listening: "This Superintendent was a slim creature of thirty-five, with a sandy goatee, and short sandy hair; he wore a stiff standing-collar whose upper edge almost reached his ears, and whose sharp points curved forward abreast the corners of his mouth... (p. 31)." The starched demeanor of this Sunday-school superintendent can only suggest to the careful reader that form closely follows substance here.

The varied narrative voices heard in these literary illustrations describe figures as experienced through the main character, or "hero's" eyes. At times the "I" perspective predominates; often, the narrator is aligned with the main character, and their voices are paired. This resultant twinship between narrator and character contributes to the reader's ability to identify with the character, and to empathize with his plight. The narrative in which the subjectivities of narrator and character are co-mingled engages the reader both intellectually and emotionally. This has considerable significance for psychological reports which are written with a specific audience of readers in mind; the reader of the psychological evaluation is most typically an adult in an important relational position to the child, eg parent or teacher. Development of a capacity for empathic understanding of the child by those in a position to help, is clearly of great potential benefit to the child.

Constructing a narrative of character: The psychological evaluation

Like its literary counterpart, the development of character in psychological evaluation and report writing employs narrative viewpoints. We learn about the child through the shifting perspectives the narrator employs within the body of the psychological report. The psychological evaluation

typically opens with a description of the presenting problems or questions, as well as a brief behavioral description of the child. The narrator here presents an external view of the child, devoid of reflection on the narrator/psychologist's part. He/she strives for objectivity, yet through the use of detail and example, aims also at creating a visual image of the child in the mind's eye of the reader.

For example, from an opening statement regarding reason for referral of a seven year old girl for psychological evaluation: "Alice was referred for evaluation at the suggestion of both her teacher and parents; difficulty focussing attention and "tuning out" (sic.) extraneous stimuli are noted... . " A description of Alice's personal history and background is offered to the reader. The narrator's style here is external, with little indication of her own reflections on the child's history. However, the fact of inclusion of this history in the body of the narrative suggests the narrator's position as to its salience to the unfolding of the story.

" Alice was born in Nicaragua, and was adopted and brought to New York by her (adoptive) parents, the Woods, when she was thirteen months old. Ms. Wood was a constant presence in Alice's life from age seven months, when she and her husband began the adoption process. Ms. Woods remained in Nicaragua until the adoption was completed and she could return to her home in New York City with the child. Alice's life in the Nicaraguan orphanage in which she was reared from birth until her adoption at age thirteen months was, by the Woods' report, marked by privation and minimal medical care. Alice's birth history is unknown. "

The narrator moves between creating an external view of the child, and drawing upon her own narrative voice. She first offers a brief behavioral description upon meeting Alice for the first time. " ... she rushed into the

playroom, loudly commenting on the various toys and games she found there." Test results are dispassionately reported: "Results of testing consistently point to weak memory abilities, both short and long term. The position and voice of the narrator must be added, though, to provide a more meaningful framework within which the results of psychological evaluation may be understood. Alice recognizes the narrator as a participant in the process, and not solely as observer/recorder of test responses. She appears hurt by the perceived sudden demandingness of the psychologist: "...Alice had little difficulty recalling short sentences, but seemed at a loss when more complex sentences were presented. She appeared to withdraw on these occasions, her face was crestfallen and she regarded the examiner with a pained expression. " Children enter into the situation of evaluation with expectations about human relationships; detached objectivity does not exist as a benign frame for the child. Rather, detachment implies withdrawal, rejection, and finally, neglect. This is likely to be especially true for Alice, where detachment on the part of adults in her early experience in the orphanage, was indeed associated with deprivation, both emotional and physical.

The "I" of the child's voice adds poignancy and insight into her situation, and in drawing upon her direct experience in relation to others, elucidates for the reader the child's own understanding of her difficulties. The narrator begins by assuming a knowledgeable voice about the child/character, then steps back and, by citing the child's remarks, permits Alice to speak directly to the reader. A back and forth quality, alternating between the viewpoint of the narrator and the "I" of the child is created.

"A sense of deficiency as intrinsic to who she is, was often expressed by repeated references to others as 'pretty.' ... Alice contrasts her work with that of

other classmates who earn comments of 'That's good work! ' from her teachers, while the teacher 'just passes me and says, this isn't good work." Alice adds: "All the other kids are dumb, they just care about themselves, like Beauty and the Beast. ... they only want to care for themselves, that's OK - they won't get any friends."

The psychologist also introduces into the narrative of the psychological report the voices and viewpoints of others, i.e. of other major characters in the child's life story, such as parent, teacher, and therapist. Alice's mother offers yet another perspective; her voice is perplexed, at times exasperated : "Alice is up and down, like a roller coaster... . At home she's gentle, happy. When she gets into a big group a dynamic happens, she's trying to control the situation. It's like not having a filter to filter out everything that's going on. She looks around, scattered, might not hear what's going on. " The teacher, in turn, describes her as "extremely insecure, easily bursting into tears. ...quick to accuse others of picking on her ...self conscious... ." Her therapist meanwhile adds yet another layer to Alice's experiential world, characterized by difference and aloneness: "A mix, engaging, theatrical ... feels different....."

Each of these narrative voices: psychologist/narrator, child/character, supporting characters, come together to create the text of Alice's story as told through the psychological report. The child's lived experience and the evolving relational matrix of parents, teachers, friends and peers, within which experience unfolds and is shaped, create the storyline of a child's life.

The plot thickens: Psychological evaluation and the development of story

Key life events and the ways in which these are negotiated provide a structure to the telling of a life story both within a literary text and within the text

of a psychological report. Eventfulness in storytelling, i.e. what lends events their uniqueness is what makes them tellable (Young, 1987). For the young child these major life events include such social markers as initial experiences of separation from parent and entry into school. Significant stressors, such as changes in family structure and relationships, frequent moves, and academic difficulties may serve as events around which a narrative becomes organized.

Organization of events in the construction of narrative occurs along two dimensions, one episodic, and the other configurational. The episodic dimension moves the story along from event to event in chronological fashion, while the non -chronological configurational creates a pattern out of a succession of events, thereby creating a plot (Ricoeur, 1980). Every narrative combines these two dimensions of episodes or events, and their organization into a pattern. The evaluation itself represents episodic experience, the pieces of which must be integrated into a whole in order for the material to be clinically useful. It is the plot that links events; moments may be considered "beads," with each bead influenced by the selection and sequence of the other beads and by the plot that links them together (Agate & Berne, cited in Vogel, 1994). The psychological evaluation thus draws upon the eventfulness of the child's lived experience, lending chronological sequence to development, while organizing these episodes of growth, change, struggle and adaptation into a meaningful configuration.

The psychological report constructs a coherent narrative of the child's life, organizing events within a personal and historical time frame. Developmentally, we trace a trajectory of growth beginning with the prenatal environment and achievement of developmental milestones, both physical and cognitive. This trajectory typically takes us through the formative experiences of

the child's life, the continuities and discontinuities of growth and experience which characterize each personal story. For example, in the case of Alice, cited earlier, we may follow her growth sequentially, from infancy to her rescue from the bleak orphanage in Nicaragua and through her early childhood years in New York City with her adoptive family. Gaps in knowledge about her background, prenatal development and early milestones of development represent discontinuities for Alice, whose environment subsequent to adoption has been characterized by parental concern and stability.

The psychological evaluation, though, must go beyond a recapitulation of episodes in the life history of a child. The psychologist-as-narrator provides hooks for episodic events to fit together in a meaningful fashion. He/she constructs connections and patterns between events by staying close to the child's subjective experience of these very events. It is through the psychologist's empathic response to the "I" of the child's responses, that he/she gives voice to the child's experiences within the text of the psychological report. In this manner, both the voices of the psychologist/narrator and the child are conjointly heard.

The setting, or the context in which events unfold frame the developing story, in both the genres of literary and psychological report writing. In a literary work, the prominence which the writer gives to the setting may vary. The setting may be critical or negligible, vague or precise, consistent or inconsistent, dynamic or static (Prince, 1982). Within the oral tradition of storytelling, orientations having to do with time, place, and setting are placed at the beginning of the story in order to provide background for the sequence of events to follow (Labov & Waletzky, 1967).

Similarly, the setting in which development unfolds is an important

element, and one which contributes heavily to our understanding of the child's story. The cultural context in which growth occurs and is shaped is an important influence (Perez Foster, 1993). In the case of Alice, her connection to her native culture of Nicaragua was reflected in her affinity for playing at balancing baskets on her head, as is common in her native land. On a deeper level, her feeling of difference reflects her cognizance of what she calls her "brownness" as contrasted with her parents' fair complexions. In Alice's fantasies her adoptive mother is referred to as her "mommy," while her birth mother, whom she has never met, assumes the title of "my brown mommy."

The narrative of the psychological evaluation describes the development of character, and creates plot from episodic events which fit together to make meaningful patterns of experience. Both the eventfulness of the child's lived experience in the world as well as his/her responses to the test situation represent episodes or events which are woven together to make the story of a child's life as told through a psychological report.

Psychological evaluation, case study, and literature: A strained relationship

The psychological evaluation which integrates the eventfulness of a child's life and creates a coherent story line has much in common with the case study, though historically there has been a somewhat uneasy relationship between the two. Case study has its origins in clinical work in psychology and psychiatry, as one of two classical ways of thinking clinically about patients, the other being clinical observation.

Psychological testing arose out of concerns about the subjectivity of the case study form, which was viewed as too open to the personal proclivities of the observer, and subject also to the distortions of the informants. The role of

the psychologist in organization of the case material, together with his/her own knowledge and experiential base was viewed as compromising objectivity (Rapaport, et al., 1979). Standard scoring procedures in psychological testing, were viewed as minimizing the risk of subjective judgment on the part of the practitioner, but also implied that personal history could be considered outside of formal evaluation. Rapaport, et al . (1979) suggested that case history and psychological testing exist as parallel sources of information, with psychological testing serving as a shorthand for history taking and clinical observation.

There is, though, no shorthand for phenomenological understanding of a child's life circumstances which does not risk shortchanging some aspect of that child's experience. Tallent (1993) suggests a variation of the case study, a "case-focused" approach to psychological report writing, in which the psychologist adapts interpretive meanings of specific test data to the "mission" or purpose of the evaluation. He advocates that the psychologist practice a form of "caricature," by selecting content. Although he acknowledges that by eliminating material a distortion of the whole person in introduced, and argues that an undistorted picture of the person is not a possibility. What is omitted, though, is often crucial; what is left out of the diagnostic "stories" that clinicians construct is often cultural difference and the particularities of individual experience.

The uneasy relationship between case study and psychological evaluation is mirrored in the relationship between case study and literature. Case study perhaps comes closest to literature in the development of plot, i.e. the story line which describes a life. Schafer (1981) speaks of the literary power of Freud's case studies, but emphasizes that Freud's constructions went beyond literary art to describe the theoretical framework within which the patient

could be understood. Freud's case studies are structurally likened to mystery novels, with Freud cast in the role of detective. Cohn (1992) warns that although both case histories and novels are emplotted stories, there is a danger to associating Freud's case studies with literary works of fiction. Where the term fiction refers only to features common to all narrative texts this comparison is viewed as harmless. However, where fiction assumes the broader, more common association with fantasy, the comparison clearly becomes problematic.

Reading the text: Fact, fiction, and impossible objectivity:

Construction of a child's narrative takes place in the interaction between the child and the psychologist. Psychological evaluation inevitably incorporates both the subjectivities of the child and the psychologist , while the quest for absolute objectivity is an impossible one. Rather than uncovering immutable truths, the process of psychological evaluation constructs a plausible story. The criterion against which this socially constructed story is measured is its usefulness, i.e. how well it explains the child's highly individualized behavior, abilities, and difficulties.

The psychological evaluation is a public document; its purpose is to be read, and in the reading, to serve a clinically useful purpose. It is written with a specific audience in mind, i.e. those people who are in a position to understand and to help the child. The psychological report invites the reader to figuratively step into the story and enter the child's world. The reader of a literary text similarly is actively engaged in a communicative act, and reconstructs voices and roles for the characters (Fowler, 1977). Focus has shifted from deciphering the author's intentions to examining the ways in which readers structure text

and imbue it with meaning (Prince, 1982).

The engaged reader derives meaning from the psychological report which enables him/her to think more broadly about the child. A dialogic relationship between text and reader is intrinsic to the psychological evaluation, with the reader addressed very directly in the 'Recommendations' offered. There is a parallel expectation on the part of the reader that his/her engagement be solicited. Indeed the psychological report is useful insofar as it engages the reader intellectually, and prompts him/her to reflect on his/her practices, with specific reference to the child.

Conclusions:

Psychological evaluation, case study, and literary text have as their subject the development of character; all three genres are emplotted stories whose telling is the craft of the narrator/writer. All three have in common a relationship to reader; like its literary counterpart, the psychological report invites the reader to derive meaning from the text. The psychological report is an account of the story of a child's growth and development over time and within particular familiar, social, and cultural contexts. The narrative that is constructed contains a multiplicity of voices: that of the psychologist-as-narrator, the "I" of the child, and the perspectives of teacher, parent, and others.

A paradigmatic shift from psychological evaluation as solely a profile of strengths and weaknesses to evaluation as construction of narrative is proposed. A child is more than the sum of his/her strengths and weaknesses; the psychological evaluation must fill out the frame provided by testing in order to create a coherent and comprehensive account of a life.

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